

Message Text

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SUBJ: BRITISH COLUMBIA VIEWS ON QUEBEC SEPARATISM: QUARTERLY UPDATE

REF: 76 VANCOUVER 1309

1. INITIAL EMOTIONAL REACTION TO LAST NOVEMBER'S PARTI QUEBECOIS VICTORY HAS SUBSIDED AND BRITISH COLUMBIANS HAVE SETTLED BACK INTO A PREOCCUPATION WITH THEIR OWN PROVINCIAL AFFAIRS. THE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENT'S TIME IS TAKEN UP WITH INVESTIGATIONS INTO POLITICAL SCANDALS. THE OPPOSITION SEEKS DESPERATELY TO MAKE POLITICAL POINTS AGAINST THE SOCRED GOVERNMENT. THE MEDIA DEVOTES ITS COLUMNS AND AIR TIME TO PAROCHIAL INTERESTS. THE BUSINESS COMMUNITY FRETS ABOUT LACKLUSTER ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE. LABOR WORRIES ABOUT JOBS AND CONTRACT NEGOTIATIONS.

2. THERE IS NONETHELESS SERIOUS CONCERN ABOUT THE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN QUEBEC AND THE THREAT POSED TO THE UNITY AND STABILITY OF THE CONFEDERATION. THAT THERE IS ALSO A SENSE OF DETACHMENT IS OCCASIONED BY SEVERAL FACTORS. FOR ONE, THE SEPARATISM ISSUE IS SEEN AS LACKING IMMEDIACY. IT IS UNDERSTOOD IT MAY BE YEARS BEFORE A REFERENDUM, IF ANY, IS HELD. FOR ANOTHER, THERE IS

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CONFIDENCE--EVEN COMPLACENCY--THAT WHATEVER EVENTUATES, BRITISH COLUMBIA WITH ITS UNDERLYING ECONOMIC STRENGTH WILL BE ABLE TO SURVIVE IN GOOD FASHION. FOR A THIRD, NO ONE IN OTTAWA IS IN ANY URGENT WAY ASKING BRITISH COLUMBIA OR ANY OF THE PROVINCES TO GET BEHIND A PLAN OF ACTION TO DEAL WITH WHAT IS THE MOST SERIOUS NATIONAL PROBELM IN CANADA TODAY.

3. TO THE EXTENT THAT THE GOC, NAMELY THE PRIME MINISTER, HAS REVEALED STRATEGY FOR DEALING WITH THE "FRENCH FACT" AND THE CRISIS IN QUEBEC, THE BRITISH COLUMBIA PUBLIC HAS BEEN COOL, UNRECEPTIVE. BRITISH COLUMBIANS OF VIRTUALLY ALL PERSUASIONS ARE COMMITTED TO THE IDEA OF A UNITED CANADA AS WAS SHOWN BY THEIR ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE TO PRIME MINISTER TRUDEAU'S MOVING ADDRESS TO THE U.S. CONGRESS AND HIS DEFIANCE OF RENE LEVESQUE'S OBJECTIVES. IN CONTRAST, TRUDEAU'S SEEMING LAISSEZ-FAIRE ADVOCACY OF AN EARLY QUEBEC REFERENDUM BINDING UPON THE ENTIRE NATIONAL WAS GREETED WITH A RESOUNDING SILENCE.

4. BRITISH COLUMBIANS APPEAR TO BE NO MORE TAKEN WITH THE SIMPLISTIC VIEWS OF PREMIER BENNET THAT A CONFEDERATION OF STRONG REGIONAL GROUPINGS AND OF DECENTRALIZED FEDERAL AUTHORITY WOULD BE THE BEST SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT FOR CANADA AND "MAKE A STRONG COUNTY." ACCORDING TO BENNET, "IT IS ONLY WHERE YOU'VE GOT WEAK PROVINCES THAT YOU'VE GOT DISSENT AND DISCORD AND PEOPLE LOOKING FOR SOLUTIONS THAT I DON'T THINK ARE THE ANSWER, AND THAT IS 'BREAK THE COUNTRY UP': IT'S NOT 'BREAK IT UP'--IT'S TO ALLOW THOSE AREAS TO SOLVE THEIR ECONOMIC PROBLEMS OR THEIR CULTURAL PROBLEMS AND STAY TOGETHER."

5. OTHER B.C. OPINION MAKERS, SUCH AS DAVID ABLETT, EDITOR OF THE VANCOUVER SUN'S EDITORIAL PAGES, COUNTER THAT CANADA IS ALREADY MORE DECENTRALIZED THAN ALMOST ANY FEDERATION IN THE WORLD, AND THAT THE PARTI QUEBECOIS ASKS NOT FOR A BIGGER SHARE OF POLITICAL POWER BUT FOR ALL THE POWERS OF A SOVEREIGN STATE. HIS MESSAGE IS THAT "THE RESPONSE TO THE THREAT OF QUEBEC SEPARATISM IS NOT TO GIVE PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS MORE POWER BUT TO CONVINCE QUEBECKERS, ONE BY ONE, THAT THEY ARE WANTED IN THIS COUNTRY WHATEVER THE GOALS OF THE GOVERNMENT LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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THEY HAVE ELECTED." NO ONE, HOWEVER, IS TELLING BRITISH COLUMBIANS HOW TO GO ABOUT THIS TASK.

6. IN CONCLUSIONS, BRITISH COLUMBIA PUBLIC OPINION ON THE ISSUE OF QUEBEC SEPARATISM HAS NOT CONSOLIDATED TO ANY LARGE DEGREE BUT TO THE EXTENT IT HAS IT APPEARS THE PROVINCE LOOKS TO OTTAWA TO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP AND A CLEAR PLAN OF ACTION TO PRESERVE THE CANADIAN CONFEDERATION. LUPPI

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